

## Humorous Hapas, Performing Identities

DARBY LI PO PRICE

I've never heard of any *Hapa* standup comedians.

—Michael Chih Ming Hornbuckle

Most people in the United States are unaware of Asian American comedians in general, let alone *Hapa* comedians of partial Asian ancestry. *Hapa* identity is rarely expressed in American comedy. But why? And what is the significance of such comic invisibility? Who as well as what is considered to be funny are linked to attitudes, beliefs, and values. Patterns of who makes jokes and who is joked about both create and reflect patterns of power. Susan Purdie writes "abjected groups . . . will simultaneously be denied the capacity to make jokes and also form the conventional targets of jokes."<sup>1</sup> In Hitler Germany Nazi philosophers simultaneously denied people of Jewish descent the capacity to tell jokes and made them the main targets of ethnic jokes as a way to dehumanize them. In the United States the dominant culture has historically denied peoples of Native American, Asian, and mixed racial descent their sense of humor. Drawing upon extensive ethnographic research and interviews, this essay analyzes how comedians of multiracial Asian descent mediate their identities both in their performance and personal lives.

### Multiple Marginalizations

*Hapa* comedians are marginalized within mainstream comedy both for being of mixed race and for being of Asian descent. Mixed-race identity has been historically constructed in popular culture as well as

---

DARBY LI PO PRICE is a doctoral candidate in Ethnic Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. He completed his M.A. in Rhetoric and Communication at the University of California at Davis.

in social science as a tragic situation. The concept of the mixed blood as a tragic theme sprung from the context of nineteenth century racial configuration in which miscegenation was socially as well as legally a crime. The figure of the mulatta thus came to represent pathos and implied a predetermined and inevitable downfall. Reflecting and reinforcing dominant racial sentiments, the exceptionally popular blackface minstrel shows of the 1830s to the early 1900s characterized mixed-race peoples as tragic or melancholy.<sup>2</sup> Since the inception of comedy as one of America's most popular form of mass entertainment, multi-racial comedians have been prevented or discouraged from expressing mixed race sensibilities in mainstream venues.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the monological categories of race and rules of hypo-descent<sup>4</sup> in the U.S., most multiracial Asian comedians are pigeonholed as Asian or Asian American. Asian American comedians face the perception that people of Asian descent are foreign,<sup>5</sup> serious, hardworking, nerdy, subservient, exotic (when female)—and not funny, except as the targets of jokes.<sup>6</sup> Such misconceptions are exacerbated by the near exclusion of Asian Americans from popular cultural production.<sup>7</sup>

Although a number of Asian American comedians such as Margaret Cho, Henry Cho, and Tamayo Otsuki have gained exposure in the comedy industry,<sup>8</sup> multiracial Asian identities remain for the most part invisible or subsumed within mono-ethnic identities. A number of comedians of multiracial Asian descent have performed as mono-racial/ethnic comedy characters. Japanese/Finnish Amy Hill acts as a mono-racially Korean grandmother in "All American Girl," which features Margaret Cho and was the only sitcom to feature an Asian American family. Similarly, sketch comedian Rob Schneider of "Saturday Night Live" is not recognizably of Asian descent by phenotype, nor by the characterizations he has performed. Illustrating the invisibility of Schneider's Asian/Filipino ancestry on the show,<sup>9</sup> Andrew Brewer, Director of Program Standards at NBC, responded to a letter from the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) about the show's frequent use of white actors to mock Asian characters with "incidentally, with regard to your remark that we should have Asians represented in the cast, you may not have known that Rob Schneider, who was with the show for many seasons, was Asian American, his mother being from the Philippines."<sup>10</sup> Although Schneider is phenotypically white in appearances to the point that he has no recognizable Asian features, Brewer applies the rule of hypo-descent to classify him as Asian American. Exemplifying how standup comedy is a more conducive site for the personal acknowledgement of ethnicity, Schneider acknowledges his Filipino ancestry in his standup performances through jokes about his Filipino mother.

Beyond establishing birthrights, jokes about parents' heritages can be used to make commentary on larger issues such as nationality. When Cheech Marin of the popular "hippie" comedy duo "Cheech and Chong" asks Tommy Chong what he is, Chong responds, "My father is Chinese and my mother is a waitress." This joke is based on the premise that in the United States nonwhite ancestry is commonly used as a descriptor because it is considered abnormal, while European ancestry generally goes unmentioned because it is considered normal. Most people think of Chong as a Chicano—even though he has a Chinese last name. *Hapa* comedians often become subsumed within more commonly recognized ethnic or racial groups.

Michael Chih Ming Hornbuckle is a comedy actor, writer, and manager of "The 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors" which is billed as the world's largest Asian American sketch comedy group. The troupe is comprised of Chinese American, Filipino American, Japanese American, and Korean American comedy writers and actors. Although Hornbuckle has written a few skits that address *Hapa* issues, to date the group has incorporated only one of his sketches that involves *Hapa* identity. The skit "Eros and Agape" is based upon a debate between an Asian American man and woman over whether an Asian American couple can ever have a successful romance. Cupid appears and says no, at which point the Asian American man says "But I'm only half Asian." Cupid summons Aphrodite who says the Asian American woman can spend half of her time with the *Hapa* and half of her time in hell with Maury Povich (a Caucasian man married to Connie Chung). While the sketch involves a *Hapa* character, it does not feature Hornbuckle as a comedian since the part is played by another person. While Hornbuckle acts as a number of different "full-blooded" Asian Americans, he reflects "I'm not sure if people can tell I'm a *Hapa* on stage since no one has ever raised that issue."<sup>11</sup>

### Standing Up

Physically visible attributes such as race or ethnicity are aspects of personal identity for standup comedians that audiences expect them to address as a textual feature of the act.<sup>12</sup> Despite the increasing numbers of peoples of partial Asian descent, there are very few standup comedians who assert partial Asian identities in their performances.

In Hawaii, for example, standup comedians of multiracial Asian descent reveal the commercial value of expressing Hawaiian personas over multiracial Asian identities. The three top working headliner comedians in Hawaii are all of partial Hawaiian descent, and two of them are of partial Asian descent. The comedians of partial Asian de-

scent present themselves as “Hawaiian comedians” when they perform in Hawaii as well as in the mainland U.S. It is often believed that local versus non-local status is more important than race/ethnicity in Hawaii.<sup>13</sup> However, in the comedy clubs in Honolulu partial Hawaiian ancestry is a major asset. The majority of the audience members at the Hawaiian comedy clubs (there are only two and they are both in Honolulu) are Euro-American tourists.<sup>14</sup> Bringing their racial biases with them from the mainland, these audiences expect to see comedians that they believe are Hawaiian on the basis of at least partial Hawaiian ancestry and/or phenotype.<sup>15</sup> Bo Irvine of Hawaiian, Filipino, and Scot descent says that people ignored him until they found out he was part Hawaiian, and then they thought he was really cool. Andy Bumatai is of Filipino, German, and Hawaiian descent and moved to Hawaii from San Francisco when he was nine. He promotes himself as “Hawaii’s first standup comic.” Rather than making specific references to their own multiethnic/racial identities in their performances in Hawaii as well as the mainland, both Bumatai and Irvine identify themselves as being from Hawaii and joke about people who misidentify them. For example, Bumatai has opened performances with, “Hi I’m Andy Bumatai. I’m from Hawaii. I enjoy being in L.A., it’s fun being Mexican. I understand in New York I’ll be Puerto Rican.”<sup>16</sup> When I asked Bumatai about his ancestry he said “I’m a comic that happens to be Hawaiian. . . here, people are just people, this is what the rest of the world will be like when it gets it together. . . people who try to label people according to ethnicity are the problem.”

In San Francisco there are currently two professional *Hapa* Asian American standup comedians who openly express their multiracial heritage as part of their performances—Mike Moto and Tessie Chua. Their expressions of multiracial identities range from impersonal stereotypical identity references to explanations of identity preferences. Their stage personae are related to their personal perspectives of their identities and roles as comedians.

Tessie Chua overtly establishes her mixed heritage with the following joke: “In addition to being Chinese, I’m Filipino and Irish, which means I eat dog but only if I can wash it down with Guinness Stout!” This joke merely combines stereotypical traits of Filipinos as dogeaters and Irish as drinkers. The joke does not have much meaning beyond basically stating her ancestries. Chua’s personal perspectives on identity reflect a similar disconnection with her ethnic heritages. Although she grew up in San Francisco Chua says she doesn’t identify with any one ethnic group because she never learned any languages except English.

I never specifically hung out with Chinese or Filipino people because I couldn't speak Chinese or Tagalog. I know I am Chinese and Filipino and I've got the name, but I don't feel Asian. I feel American. When I was little, me and my sister would make fun of the way Filipinos speak. My father was half-Filipino and half-Chinese and my mother Irish, Filipino, and Cherokee. My father wanted us to learn Tagalog but I wouldn't do it, ha, ha.

Chua believes that to be pigeonholed as an ethnic comedian is "career suicide." Rather than ethnicity or race, Chua identifies most closely with her angry disposition. Initially trained as a character actor, Chua believes standup comedy allows her to validate her sense of self on stage: "Applause in standup gives me validation of who I am. That's me up there, not just a person. The angry person is the central character, not the sweet or docile." Chua says her anger is a result of having many bad experiences while living in New York City. Chua says that although she doesn't think of herself as Chinese, it is an advantage to have a Chinese last name because she gets invited to perform for Chinese and Asian American community events.

Mike Moto is the most traveled full-time working standup comedian in the country who expresses a multiracial Asian identity as a significant part of his routine. He introduces himself thus:

I come from a mixed marriage: I'm half-Japanese and half-Yugoslavian. Folks, you can't make up shit this weird. I'm a Japoslavian!

I always lean toward my Japanese side. What's to admire about Yugoslavia? The country is a whole rubble because they attacked themselves. And there are no more Yugo cars in the U.S. Try picking up a girl in a Yugo.

The first part of the joke relies on the incongruity of combining the names of two ethnic groups. The second part of the joke asserts Moto's preference to affiliate with his Japanese heritage over his Yugoslavian background due to a lack of positive attributes associated with Yugoslavian identity.

In offstage discussions Moto has further explained why he prefers to be identified as Japanese rather than Yugoslavian. Symbolic of such a preference, he changed his last name from Morgin to Moto to emphasize his Japanese descent. Moto says that a readily Asian identified stage name wasn't necessary when he started doing open mikes in San Francisco, but it was when he moved to the East Coast. "Anyone who looked like some kind of non-Euro ethnic person has to explain what they are. As a guy who looks Native American, Filipino, Hawaiian, East Indian, if I don't identify who I am they will sit there and wonder 'what

is this guy?" Moto believes it is significant that he needed a stage name when he started doing comedy in the Boston and New York areas. He initially used Morgin but would be stopped by people who would ask "what are you?" He says he switched his name to an Asian identifiable one to make audiences more comfortable.

Moto says his name change caused him mixed feelings. "When I first adopted the stage name I felt like I was passing because I didn't have any mixed-race material. I felt like a fraud because I didn't mention both sides. I was presenting myself as a full-blooded Japanese. But the truth is I look more Hawaiian, or Native American, or Filipino, so Asian [Americans] would call me on it. They'd say 'hey you must be mixed.'" Moto believes there are also some disadvantages of having an Asian name. "I'm getting pigeonholed [as Asian] so occasionally I have bouts of resentment or regret." His name change has created a separation between his public life and his private life. His non-comedy friends still know him as Morgin. Moto ponders "maybe it separates my two different lives and realities—public versus private. The Morgin is low key, the Moto is more outspoken, flamboyant."

Moto says one of the difficulties of expressing a multiracial Asian identity in comedy is the lack of a multiracial identification base: "The problem is—neither side wants to claim you. You are whatever other people aren't."

Performing standup in comedy clubs across the country, Moto observes that racial attitudes are very backward once you get outside of cosmopolitan West Coast cities. The prevalence of ethnocentrism and racism prevents many audiences from appreciating multiracial/ethnic identities and perspectives. Moto has had his performances interrupted by people who want to heckle him because of his mixed racial heritage. He recalls being interrupted in Idaho by a drunk guy saying something about mongrels. Moto remembers, "This guy was telling me 'I could respect you more if you were full-blooded. But you're an aberration of nature, a mongrel.'"

Moto worked that incident into a joke: "This guy once called me a mongrel—I should have humped his leg." Moto recalls seeing some black guy yelling from the back of a club in New York calling him a "slant-eyed half-Jap mother-fucking, chicken wing eating son of a bitch. . . ." He has worked it into a joke about how he has found out "you don't need to be white to be racist." He says that telling a joke about black racists tends to make white audiences more comfortable with his jokes about white racists.

In addition to hecklers, bookers and club owners are often racially abrasive, especially on the East Coast. Moto recalls bookers in Boston

who would regularly address him with racial slurs:

I used to work at a club called Nick's where the guy that booked shows used to call me "Chink-boy." One night I was supposed to do thirty minutes, so I said give me the light when I have five minutes left. I kept looking out for the light but never saw it flash, finally I got off stage and saw I'd been on for forty-five minutes. I asked the director why he didn't give me the light and he said "I said fuck it, make the Chink-boy work for his money tonight."

Moto believes it has become more difficult to address mixed-race perspectives because mainstream comedy audiences have become more conservative. "The mixed race thing could have worked better a few years ago than now, now people are more reactionary due to increasing racial tension over the past few years. That means you have to step back in terms of racial issues. So I have to be the Asian guy, before the mixed race thing, or the mongrel."

While he is keeping himself busy as a standup he thinks he could deal with issues of multiraciality more complexly if he did performance art. "A lot of comics are doing the one-person show to get deeper ideas and not worry about laughs per minute. Sometimes I think I'd like to be a performance art comedian. I'd book myself with some zany title like 'Mike Moto's One Man Show: Hopping With the Hapa!'"

### Beyond Standup

Wishing to avoid various obstacles posed by comedy clubs, a number of comics of partial Asian ancestry are pursuing performance art as the most suited venue for the expression of their multi-ethnic/racial Asian sensibilities. These performances are primarily performed for and supported by progressive Asian American and ethnically mixed school and community groups. Performance art allows the artists to go beyond the demands of mainstream comedy's insistence on lowest common denominator entertainment. They appreciate being able to avoid the racist, homophobic, and sexist environment of the white male-oriented comedy scene. Boston comedian Teja Arboleda explains that the mindset of the comedy club scene is not receptive to the expression of multiethnic/racial issues:

Boston is not receptive to my views at a mike. The difficulties in expressing multiethnic or racial enigmas are expected in a city like Boston, as the city is segregated and racially intolerant. . .the history of segregation in Boston dictates intolerance to not just culturally liberal thinking but clears the path for direct confrontation from a mostly white uncultured and narrow-minded public.

He says “beer, sex and gay bashing were pretty much the topics of every evening to late night mental trashing” at Boston comedy clubs. Performance art audiences are there to see the performance rather than to be merely entertained, socialize, or get drunk. Los Angeles performance artist Amy Hill says “as a comedian I prefer performance art because people are not there to see you bash and because I have their full attention which is necessary for complex ideas.” Los Angeles performance artist Kip Fulbeck doesn’t like having to conform his style and material to meet comedy club audiences’ expectations for “penis jokes and Eddy Murphy style humor.”

Kip Fulbeck aggressively asserts his personal perspectives on *Hapa* identity through standup style commentary he expresses in short skits. After announcing in the beginning of his show “Some Questions for 28 Kisses” that he is a *Hapa* of Chinese and English, Irish, and Welsh descent Kip jokingly asserts:

I’m not gonna explain what *Hapa* means. I’m not going to talk about checking ethnicity boxes. And I’m not gonna talk about being the model minority’s own personal model minority. So don’t even start with giving me the “best of both worlds” “hybrid vigor” “exotic” desirable bullshit—’cause I can bring you out some butt-ass ugly *Hapas* right now, alright? Seen it. Done it. Lived it. Next?

This piece addresses Fulbeck’s observation of how *Hapa* identity has been exotified and otherwise misconstrued in popular perceptions.

While Asian Americans are more aware of *Hapa* identity issues than mainstream audiences there are still many mono-racially-ethnically identified Asian Americans who don’t see *Hapas* as Asian American. Fulbeck confronts Asian Americans who don’t think *Hapas* are Asian American.

If you’re an APA (Asian Pacific American) who thinks *Hapas* aren’t really Asian Americans we got a problem. . . in too many eyes and minds an Asian American artist is one of pure Asian blood.

According to Fulbeck, “all my work is about being mixed blood. I am a *Hapa* first, an Asian American artist second.”

Kip Fulbeck says that his work is highly provocative to a wide range of peoples. Afterwards people often come up and accuse him of being racist, heterosexual or sexist, and want to know why he doesn’t address whatever issues they are affiliated with. “You name it and they’ve come after me—mostly white men or Asian women, occasionally Asian men, occasionally pro-sovereignty Hawaiians for using *Hapa*, feminists, gays, basically any oppressed group.”



In "Talking Shop" Fulbeck emphasizes the personal irony he experiences as a *Hapa* male. After he points out to a friend who doesn't date Asian men and never really thought about it that they were on a date, she tells him, "Kip, you're not like an Asian man." Then an Asian male friend tells him to make a film denouncing interracial dating. Fulbeck responds "if it weren't for a white man dating an Asian woman, I wouldn't be here." His friend says "but Kip, you're like an Asian man." Kip explains that when it comes to the issue of Asian women dating out that both Asian American women and men thought he must be on their side. "The men thought 'well, you're an Asian man, you know what it's like with all these sisters dating white guys,' and the women said 'the men are so sexist, you're *Hapa*, you're a product of this.' Then I'd get the *Joy Luck* couples coming up to me after performances and actually saying 'we want to get a closer look so we can see what our kids will look like.'" <sup>17</sup>

Amy Hill's autobiographical performance art narrative "Beside Myself" examines how the dominant society's attitudes influenced her identity development as a woman of partial Asian descent. <sup>18</sup>

People see me walking down the sidewalk with my European friend and her daughter and assume I'm the nanny or the housekeeper. I don't know where people think I'm from but it sure ain't here! . . . People speak to me in Spanish all the time. I remember this woman who came up to me and started speaking in Spanish. I said "I'm sorry I don't speak Spanish." She thought I was lying—she said "You're ashamed, you're Latina, be proud." . . . it would be great if people could tell that I was Japanese and Finnish right off the bat. But then I'd be pulling a reindeer and pulling a Dauschund dog.

In Hill's narrative she emphasizes that there are many variables besides being of mixed descent that greatly influence people of mixed descent's lives.

I've got friends that are half-Japanese and half-African American that are dark. Half-Chinese and half-Puerto Rican that are overweight. Or half-Filipino and half-Mexican and shave their head and really rich and powerful with a bad complexion. When they walk through the world I wonder what they feel, what voices they hear?

For me the voices never stop. Speak English! Like when I see someone is mixed race and I think "what the heck is that?" . . . I want to find my way back, walk back into that room and find like my mother did, find I am creating the voices, and I can make them stop until I can sing my song—Amy, Amy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier!

Hill has noticed that her material appeals to a wide range of audience interests.<sup>19</sup> She observes people tend to focus on whatever issues they are preoccupied with. "If they're interested in mixed-race, they see my show as being about mixed-race. If they have a body image thing going on, they see it in those terms." She recalls being surprised after a performance in a small town in Canada when two Canadian white women came up after the show to thank her for telling "our story."

Hill believes *Hapa* identity is still an important issue to examine because "groups are still so polarized." She notes that interracial identities and issues are primarily addressed in the media in terms of people of African American and Euro-American descent.

As a Boston performer Teja Arboleda is acutely aware of the need to bring discussions of multiethnicity/racality beyond black and white issues. Teja Arboleda demystifies multiraciality/ethnicity in his autobiographical performance "The Adventures of Ethnic Man." He begins the show by announcing his own multiethnic/racial heritage:

My mother's mother is German, my mother's father is Danish. My father's mother is African/Native American, my father's father is Filipino/Chinese. I was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Japan, and that's why they call me Ethnic Man! ha ha ha ha ha. . . there's that ethnic guy, doing that ethnic thing. Oh, isn't he so ethnic, yes, it's Ethnic Man. He can leap from race to race in a single bound. It's Ethnic Man. Not quite black as black, not quite white as white, but he's never green. Sort of brown, sort of in-between! ha, ha!!!

He explains that because his father censored the fact that their family has African ancestry he did not realize he was partially African American until he was in his twenties. He discusses how it was confusing to grow up with phenotypically ambiguous appearances when he attends a predominantly black school in Brooklyn where he was expected to identify whether he is black or white. Arboleda then draws from his experiences of living in Japan to examine issues of multiethnicity/racality from an international perspective. Arboleda expresses Japanese perceptions of his identity through jokes such as the following one:

The Japanese school girls in their uniforms, they thought I was American. They would crowd around me on the train, crowd around me and pat my head and say "Hey, are you an American? You're an American right?" No I'm an Arab and I flew here on a magic carpet. Yes, I'm an American. "Oh, you're so cute, you're so cute. You're an American—you look like Michael Jackson!" ha, ha.

Michael Jackson? If I went back now, they'd probably still think I

looks like Michael Jackson. I'd have to say "Michael Jackson doesn't even look like Michael Jackson!!! ha, ha!!!"

Arboleda does not think it is a complement to be associated with Michael Jackson, citing Jackson as a prime example of the type of ethnic/racial denial that he is trying to overcome. Arboleda says half of the motivation for his work is his attempt to reveal "the power, and sometimes necessity, and pain, that comes from family secrecy." Discussing the detrimental effects this secrecy has had on his family, Arboleda says:

My father is still living in this secrecy. It's to the point that one of my relatives has threatened to commit suicide because he can't deal with the secrecy. . . . Performance art is like undressing in public—there are no more secrets.

While Arboleda has always had to perform mono-racial/ethnic characters as an actor in the United States as well as Japan, he has always expressed his full multiethnicity in his standup and performance art comedy work. "I never once thought it better to present myself as one ethnicity as a comedian. That would go against everything I'm doing." In addition to breaking cycles of ethnic denial, one of the goals of his performance is to break down ethnocentric thinking that continues to keep groups separated. He finishes his show with the assertion: "we all want the same thing. We all want to preserve our heritages and our cultures—but we can't continue to isolate ourselves."

Performances of identities mediate larger issues of ethnicity, race, culture, nationalism, gender, sexuality, and political economy. Performing *Hapa* identity as a comic situation frees our minds from xenophobic conceptions of people of mixed race and Asian descent. Humorous *Hapas* create mirth from the quandaries of multiplicity. Above all, *Hapa* humor evokes the fun, wit, imagination, and creativity that are central aspects of humanity.

## Notes

1. Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1993), 129. Purdie writes "'Humour'. . . is crucially implicated in a construction of full personality. To be able to joke is to be able to speak 'properly,' to be a 'proper' person. In fact, it is perversely self-contradictory to assert that one does not, overall, possess a sense of humour," 138.
2. Tragedy evokes passions such as sadness, anguish, and horror arising from events that are insurmountable. Tragic figures are characterized by a predestined and predictable downfall. In contrast, comedy evokes fun, joy, confusion, and open endedness. While it may include tragic events, comedy is unpredictably open to every imaginable outcome. See Mikhail

Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist, ed., Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1981); Glenn D. Wilson, *Psychology for Performing Artists: Butterflies and Boquets* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1994).

3. Construed as threats to the separation between the races as well as to the existence of the white race itself, mixed-race identity was no laughing matter. The two main themes of blackface minstrel shows were fear of black uprising, and anti-miscegenation. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Mixed-race women became staple figures of minstrelsy and were portrayed as tragic or melancholy figures of sexual desire. See Freda Scot Giles, "From Melodrama to the Movies: The Tragic Mulatta as a Type Character," in *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity*, Naomi Zack, ed. (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995). While the dark blacks provided the laughs by acting as coarse and mannerless, the light-skinned mulattas or "yaller gals" summoned feelings of pathos as objects of desire who met unhappy ends. Viewed as serious threats to society, mixed-race male identities were excluded in black-face comedy shows. Light-skinned mulattoes had to wear black-face in order to perform comic roles. Fifteen-sixteenths white in ancestry, the popular pioneer African-American comedian Bert Williams wrote in his memoirs how he resented having to wear blackface to perform as a comedian. See Eric Ledell Smith, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1992).
4. Michael Omi and Howard Winant define the hypo-descent rule as referring to where a person of mixed descent is affiliated with the subordinate group rather than the superordinate group to avoid racial ambiguity. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 60.
5. Historian/journalist Bret Harte wrote of the Chinese in California in *Ah Sin* (1877) "they seldom smile, and their laughter is of such an extraordinary and sardonic nature—so purely a mechanical spasm, quite independent of any mirthful attribute—that to this day I am doubtful whether I ever saw a Chinaman laugh."
6. In 1994 I asked a number of people in Boston why we don't see very many Asian American comedians on TV. Answers ranged from "we see them as serious hardworking, studious people," "maybe humor is not valued in their culture," and "they can't talk right so they can't tell no funny jokes" to "because they don't have a sense of humor." Darby Li Po Price, "From Blackface to Mixed Race: Mediating Multiracial Identities in American Ethnic Comedy," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1997. Assertions that people of Asian descent "can't tell no funny jokes" feed stereotypical beliefs that Asians are incompetent in a range of activities: from not being able to speak properly, drive correctly, to not being socially well rounded enough to be considered competent enough for high level managerial positions.
7. Dorinne Kondo writes "like so many people on the margins, Asian Americans are generally erased from realms of cultural representation." Dorinne

- Kondo, "Bad Girls: Theater, Women of Color, and the Politics of Representation," in *Women Writing Culture*, Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 49-64
8. Observing the emergence of Asian American comedians, Bill Wong writes "the very fact that he [Kataoka], Cho, Manalo, and other Asian Americans are comedians defies stereotypes." William Wong, *Asian Week* "Bill Wong" column, September 27, 1991.
9. The relative scarcity of Filipino Americans in television entertainment compared to other Asian American groups can be attributed to their colonial relationship with the United States. See Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 17.
10. *The Newsletter of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans* (1995).
11. Michael Chih Ming Hornbuckle gave me this interpretation and uses the same premise to joke "my mother was Chinese and my father was in the military."
12. David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston, Massachusetts: Unwin Hyman, 1992), 18.
13. Johnson, Ronald C., "Offspring of Cross-Race and Cross-Ethnic Marriages in Hawaii," in *Racially Mixed People in America*, Maria P. P. Root, ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1992), 239-249.
14. Comedian Bo Irvine explains "audiences at shows are mostly white, who else would pay for humor except people from a humor deficient society or culture?"
15. Comedian Jaz Kaner explains that although he was born and grew up in Hawaii and speaks fluent pidgin audiences still have a hard time believing he is Hawaiian because he is phenotypically white. When I saw him perform in Honolulu he opened with "Aloha. It looks like most of you are from out of state" and was met with "you too!" from the audience. Kaner has recently moved to Los Angeles where he believes he can be more successful as a comedian.
16. From "Pat Morita's Mixed Plate of Comedy" video (Honolulu: KGMB, 1985).
17. George Johnston "Shame on Those Ashamed of Martial Arts," *Rafu Shimpo*, December 21, 1994.
18. Hill says "it's a man's world still. All accross the board it's men that are running everything. If it's an evening of women it's 'Women's Comedy Night' but not the other way around."
19. Amy Hill's "Tokyo Bound" performance addresses her experiences as a *Hapa* in Japan.

# FIRE QUIET

**New from the Asian American  
Writers' Workshop**  
*Three landmark anthologies that  
redefine Asian American literature*

## **Quiet Fire: Asian American Poetry, 1892-1970**

**Juliana Chang, Editor**

This historical survey of Asian American poetry presents some of the finest of the period, beginning with writing from the 1890s by Sadakichi Hartmann, and Yone Noguchi, to Jun Fujita, Bunichi Kagawa, Hisaye Yamamoto, Toyo Suyemoto, Jose Garcia Villa, Diana Chang, Carlos Bulosan, Fred Wah, Lawson Inada, Yuki Hartman, Al Robles, Zulfikar Ghose and others, as well as oral and musical forms such as plantation worksongs from Hawai'i, lyrics from Chris Iijima and Nobuko Miyamoto's album *A Grain of Sand*.  
(pb \$16.95/ISBN 1-889876-02-x)

## **Flippin': Filipinos on America**

**Luis H. Francia, Eric Gamalinda, Editors**

In this anthology, three generations of poets and writers from the United States and the Philippines portray America in their own words. Among the contributors are Jessica Hagedorn, Ninotchka Rosca, Carlos Bulosan, Bienvenido Santos, NVM Gonzales, Linda Ty Casper, F. Sionil Jose, R. Zamora Linmark, Fatima Lim Wilson and Maria Luisa A. Cariño.  
(pb \$14.95/ ISBN 1-889876-01-1)

# FLIPPIN'

# CONTOURS OF THE HEART

**Contours of the Heart:  
South Asians Map North America**  
**Rajini Srikanth, Sunaina Maira, Editors**

This unique anthology of fiction, essays, poetry, and photography explores multiple ways of "feeling at home," reflecting complexities of class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnic identities. Contributors include Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, Darius Cooper, Shamita Das DasGupta, Syantani DasGupta, Chitra Divakaruni, Ginu Kamani, Amitav Kumar, Saleem Peeradina, Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Sandip Roy.  
(pb \$16.95/ ISBN 1-889876-00-3)

Distributed by Rutgers University Press and available at all major bookstores. For information: Asian American Writers Workshop  
37 St. Mark's Place, New York NY 10025, T: (212) 228-6710, [aaaww@panix.com](mailto:aaaww@panix.com), <http://www.panix.com/~aaaww>